

Personal Notes from a Palestinian in the Diaspora: Thoughts on my own Generational Trauma

I have felt myself impacted in so many different ways by the recent conflict in the Middle East, especially the bombing of Gaza. Below is my attempt to put some thoughts around this into words, to flesh something out for myself and hope that it might be of interest to others.

I recently read about Prof Veronika Cohen, Holocaust survivor, who celebrated her 80th birthday staging a demonstration outside an Israeli prison to raise awareness of Palestinian prisoners held within and specifically one feminist politician, Khalida Jarrar, of whom Cohen said:

“I think about her unbearable situation. I can’t stop thinking of a woman in her 60s who has already suffered so much in life, and who finds herself in prison without ever being judged.” Her statement made me think of the pain Cohen herself had experienced, the trauma of being one of the few Jewish children who survived the Holocaust in the Budapest ghetto, and how wonderful it is that despite her unbelievable trauma and pain she is able to continue to feel such empathy with another person, all the more so due to the current situation in the Middle East.

It also took my mind to generational trauma and how one can heal. How despite knowing pain and suffering, one may yet maintain humanity. Maybe even because of knowing pain and trauma.

These are themes that lately keep occupying my mind in different forms, like clouds forming from different aspects, thoughts and notions, thoughts merging and clustering to create something then dispersing and vanishing again, only to reappear when I least expect it.

As a Palestinian in the diaspora, recent events in the Middle East, especially the bombing and invasion of Gaza with the huge civilian death toll as well as the onslaught of arrests and killings in the West Bank, have disturbed the equilibrium I have held mentally and emotionally thus far in my adult life. It has unsettled me personally and made me think more of my memories and the generational trauma my family holds.

As a child one of my defining memories is that of my father packing his bags after a weekend visit to us in our family home in Southern Germany to return to Berlin where he lived during the working week. He is Palestinian, my mother British, and they met in Germany and we continued to live there during my childhood.

I was about 7 years old and I remember clearly how he would follow a ritual each time of calmly folding things and neatly arranging what he was due to take with him. I also remember feeling that he was involved in some mysterious process somehow. A feeling that this was about more than just packing your things ahead of travel, it was a process that somehow excluded me, us, the people around him and instead was engaging him at a very deep level. He was somewhere else, which put him beyond my grasp for that time. There were also other occasions when this feeling was repeated, when he was listening to certain music, preparing certain meals. There was also a sense of sadness surrounding these periods. At the time, I understood this as being connected to him leaving us, his family and it being the end of the fun weekend we had inevitably all had together. Much later I understood that there was also another sadness, a trauma, in fact many traumas that were layered on top of this simple short term separation: the traumas of being a Palestinian. I understand that now more than ever with the recent events unfolding in Gaza and my trying to process what it means, what it feels like to be Palestinian within this. My experience is not of a Palestinian in Gaza, experiencing the most horrendous horrors every day, I am not even in the West Bank, where my identity is challenged by Israeli settlers. No, my experience is one of living in the diaspora. A very comfortable life with everything I could wish for, far, far away from war and suffering. In many ways

talking about trauma feels self indulgent, and almost unjustifiable compared to what my fellow Palestinians are experiencing. My experience is one of being away from a homeland and being brought up by a father holding his own trauma, sadness and losses. This is an experience that is not unique to me but held by many Palestinians living far away from home. Many like him were forced to leave generations ago, and many others have never been permitted to return even for short trips.

My father's experience and his deep sadness was one of living away from his parents, sisters, brothers, cousins and the wider family and friends he was surrounded by growing up. I know he missed the hot air that hits you in the summer when you step out of the house, the smell of the lemon tree in our garden there, the chat and banter with people in the souq when buying fresh fruit and vegetables (Palestinians are known for their teasing sense of humour), the long conversations over tea with his sisters when they would fall into laughter about some incident or other, faces creased with pleasure and tears rolling down their cheeks, slapping each others' shoulders. We felt how much he missed these things because we saw how happy he was when we were able to travel to visit our family in the West Bank. We saw how relaxed he seemed when we were there, how he seemed to blossom, seeming more confident and alive. I remember registering for the first time how different he looked in the local dress of a white gown, much more appropriate for the hot whether than his Western clothes.

We visited the West Bank and kept a connection, yet the journeys to the West Bank were hard, we were not always able to travel, settler violence and attacks on Palestinian villages would mean that often, and at short notice, planned trips to visit family had to be abandoned. I remember, as a child, that confusion well. It was hard to understand why we were not able to go.

There was also confusion when we were there. The checkpoints where Israeli soldiers demand you step out of the car and show your papers. Feeling persecuted for who you are. I have a British passport but my name carries the roots of my identity and heritage. Seeing the machine guns slung over young and sometimes nervous soldiers.

At many checkpoints a British passport would at least get you through quicker, which stirred up guilt when looking over at other Palestinians waiting in the baking sun, old men and women waiting, little children crying. Never the less it was good to be back. It felt like home to us too. We loved seeing our cousins and playing in the streets with them.

The injustice of not being allowed to travel to your home country was one of the many traumas that coloured my father's psyche, that spread its tentacles deep into and through his being and ours, his children's.

It was one of the many traumas. Not the earliest though, by far. Over the many years, fragments of these many traumas have appeared in narratives told, in silent tears, and many other unpredictable ways.

I remember when I decided to work in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria when I was in my twenties and my parents came to visit, my father's embrace after only 4 months away in a busy street in Damascus, his involuntary tears and pained look in his face. As I say I had not been away for very long and it was certainly not the longest I had been away, I had been away to University and travelled around Europe. I think it took my father by surprise too, I have to this day not been able to talk to him about this fully. It feels too painful.

Many years later, partly inspired by my time in Syria, I trained to become a Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist and for the first time was able to make some sense of my feelings and those of my father.

On top of the historic traumas that my father felt, were layered by newer ones. These now affected me too as I understood of injustices of land and houses occupied and taken over, of relatives and friends injured and killed. During my childhood 2 Intifadas (uprisings by Palestinians against the illegal occupation by the Israel Occupation Force) came and went and images of stone throwing children were broadcast on our TV screens. I remember waking up as a child at home at night when I had a bad dream and seeking out my parents. In the lounge the TV was on with the news just the images appeared of a Palestinian boy of about 10 having his arms and legs broken by an Israeli soldier with a rock as he lay crying in pain. My parents locked in shock and guilt for being thousands of miles away in safety. I think it was this guilt and shock that made it hard for them to switch off from the news and protect me from seeing these images, from talking about it.

And then there are deeper, earlier traumas, of memories that are faint, not fully understood, what Bion might describe as beta elements (Bion 1963). These are of when my father was a little boy in Palestine in the 1950s and the recent occupation of Palestinian homes by Israelis had sparked various fighting. Palestinians were told not to return to the homes they were expelled from, and my father has some memory of the ones that did return being shot and for some cruel reason their bodies cut open and filled with oranges. The bodies were then dumped outside the local Palestinian hospital. Maybe a cruel sadistic play on people who were wishing to get fruits from their own land. The details and motifs are not understood, it is hard to make any sense of this cruelty, especially as a child, surrounded by adults who are in shock and mourning the loss of their land and homes. This memory that my father holds was buried and only came to the surface recently, it had been deeply buried in its not understandable form. As the ground in Gaza was churned by the bulldozers of war recently, this memory seems to have come to the surface also. The opening of the soil by the bombs, the craters exposing the deep buried soil seemed to open up all kinds of wounds for my father's psyche too, letting submerged and buried pain come to the surface of his mind once more.

As I say, the experience of being a Palestinian led me to become increasingly interested in trauma and how it lives in us and in families, in groups of people and societies. I had some experience of this after all. Psychoanalytic theory and Freud's writings put some boundaries around it for me and some way to understand it all. Bion also helped me. These memories and traumas can be understood, made sense of and *can* be processed and even help us in our professional and personal lives, offering us a chance for growth and understanding ourselves and others. It may help to deepen my humanity.

This led me to where I work now, in a trauma service as I feel I have some understanding and knowledge that is relevant. This had made me feel safe and stable for many years. I feel knowledge and understanding of trauma, and of myself has made me level and given me some sense of deep calm. Or so I thought. I was thus very taken aback when the bombing and invasion of Gaza following the 7th October attacks and hostage taking affected me so deeply.

It is hard to find words for this next bit. These are my beta elements that I have not fully understood or processed yet. There are many different layers to my pain. This war, unlike wars in the past, is played out on social media platforms like no other. We see unfiltered images of pain, of death and of destruction. Mothers weeping for dead children they are still holding in their arms, fathers cradling their dead wives and maimed, broken tiny bodies of children.

It also feels lonely. No foreign reporters allowed into Gaza and Occupied Territories means mainstream newspapers show little of what is happening. This stands in such contrast to what is available on social media. This causes some disconnected in me. Two parallel realities that I am trying to put together in my mind.

All this sits on top of the traumas of my father and my own. Throughout growing up, one of my biggest fears was that I will repeat something of passing on something of the trauma to my own children. That they will grow up holding a pain that relates to their identity, their heritage, to being Palestinian. Recently, me and my children tried to find some books about Palestine and Palestinian culture for children in the library. We were told there aren't any- it's too controversial. How do you explain that to a child when you are trying to explain who they are. Your identity, who you are, is too controversial. Sorry. Can you be something else please?

As I processed our family trauma and the collective trauma all Palestinians hold through my studies and my own Psychoanalysis I felt pretty confident that I would be able to do this differently and that by processing the trauma I would not pass it on. I was very wrong. As the war on Gaza has relentlessly gone on and months pass I feel how it is casting a shadow over me too, who I am and how others around me understand me. How can I explain this pain to others who aren't even fully aware of what is going on? Can't see what is happening?

And it affects me and my loved ones. Me and my children in a way I really hoped it would not. But at night, at home, I have lain in bed with my children after reading bed time stories silently weeping. It sometimes feels too much to hold them close as I think of the children unable to be cradled by their parents.

Maybe it is that the images I see are of children, women and men who look like me, my family. They are me and my family. I know that they are being killed and wounded for who they are and that hurts because that is us too. We share that identity and that tie to the land. And I want my children to have that but for it not to be overshadowed by the 'it's too political', 'it's too controversial', by the pain and the suffering.

I have found areas of Palestinian culture, dance, embroidery, food and books. It hurts to try and explain it all to my children but I am learning to try and let the many facets of being Palestinian in the diaspora sit next to each other, to overlap and different aspects come to the fore on different days and different occasions. This is Palestinian identity. The pain and suffering is also what makes the beauty, the resilience that people talk about. The haunting Palestinian songs and poems, their beauty comes from knowing suffering and pain.

And then my thoughts turn back to Prof Veronika Cohen, and how despite her pain, or maybe because of it, she has become the humanitarian she is. I hope that she would not mind me referring to her, but I have come to see her as a symbol for the possibility that pain and trauma can and must shape us for the better. It can never be taken out of my identity, but maybe I will learn to tame it for my sake and for the sake of my family.

Biography:

Holocaust survivor marks 80th birthday with protest outside Israeli prison
The Guardian Newspaper, 20th September 2024

[Holocaust survivor marks 80th birthday with protest outside Israeli prison | Israel | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/israel/2024/sep/20/holocaust-survivor-veronika-cohen-80th-birthday-protest-israel-prison)

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